No. 89

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"Yes, by all means," he replied rather vehemently. "If this girl is really insane, she must not be allowed to run at large and repeat this preposterous story."

R. of M. C., No. 89.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

WITH HER hands tightly clenched behind her back Alice began to pace the floor. Her heart was torn with many conflicting emotions at this particular moment. A battle was being waged between honor and desire. Prudence she had cast to the winds. Had not her husband deliberately thrown her aside for this other woman?

Since he chose to neglect her, Alilce considered it her privilege and right to bestow her affections where she chose, to accept the attentions of a lover for whom she now was waiting.

Her husband's last words still rang in her ears distinctly.

"I'll not give you up to this other woman," she had told him. But she got no satisfaction by watching the cold expression of his face.

"It is a matter of indifference to me what you do. Keep that clearly in mind," he had replied.

"I repeat that I am determined to be free to act as I see best in this matter," he had added after a slight pause.

Alice had only a vague idea of his terrible will-power. But it would have been impossible to be his wife without getting some impression of the force within him—the force that gave power to his face.

She had become conscious of the fact that their life's tragey was nearing the end. Her soul had risen in hot rebellion at the thought of losing him.

"Let that other woman have him?" it cried. "No! I'll die first."

But the hopelessness of it all had dawned upon her by painful degrees.

All her persuasion and tears had proven fruitless, and now since he meant to pursue his first love, regardless of her feelings, she claimed the privilege of a neg-

lected wife.

Her incessant mental torture came to a sudden halt with the sound of a timid knock on the door. The color had risen to her face as she glided noiselessly forward to open it.

The next instant she stood face to face with Russel Sherwood.

The young man hesitated a moment before he entered, but Alice seized him by the arm and drew him inside, then closed the door carefully.

"You are rather late, Russel," she said softly, extending both of her hands.

He fell upon his knees before her majestic beauty, and covered her hands with passionate kisses.

"Your letter has made me the happiest man in all the world," he stammered brokenly. "You do love me, Alice, do you not?"

"If I did not," she replied with a tempting smile, "I would not have written that letter and invited you to meet me here at this hour."

The next instant he had crushed her to his bosom, and she suffered him to press his hot lips to hers in a long kiss.

"Tell me, Alice," he said after a pause, "just why did you treat me so cruelly when we met at New Orleans for the first time?"

"Because the presence of my husband made it imperative," she answered frankly. "I believe I loved you the very first moment my eyes beheld you; and I knew it for a certainty the day you rode that wild horse at the race track; but I did not dare to encourage you openly. A married woman is governed by the iron bound rules of convention."

Russel Sherwood was still standing in front of Alice with his eyes feasting upon her wonderful loveli-

ness and personal charms.

With an impulsive move she drew him down upon the divan beside her, then continued in a sad tone:

"My life under present conditions is unbearable to me. This very moment my husband is searching for the woman who holds his heart in the palm of her hand. He has forgotten his duties to me, while my soul craves for affection and love."

The attitude of Russel Sherwood had undergone a sudden change.

He moved a little distance away from the enchantress, while his eager glance studied her face for some time.

"I cannot understand," he said at length, "how Robert Ames can neglect you. You are the most beautiful woman in the world. He surely is casting aside a pearl.

"I must admit frankly," he continued after a slight pause, "that I admire your husband immensely. He is a man, every inch of him.

"But his utter indifference toward you leaves the way open for me to win your love and heart. It will vastly simplify matters, and make it easy for you to obtain the divorce necessary to our union."

An expression of intense disappointment crossed Alice's face.

"What do you propose to do?" she asked with a cynical smile.

"To meet him face to face, like a man, and ask him to release you," was the instant reply.

"That would be very imprudent, Russel," Alice frowned. "There are a number of reasons why he would not listen to such a proposition. He would make every effort to foil your plan if for no other reason than to avoid the scandal and notoriety a divorce would create."

For some minutes neither spoke a word. Alice tried hard to hide her chagrin.

Had she after all been mistaken in this handsome young fellow? The idea of becoming his wife under existing conditions seemed preposterous to her.

This was not what she had expected.

"You love me, do you not, Russel?" she said coaxingly, her black eyes burning into his.

"I love you more than my own life, Alice," he cried, taking her in his arms. "I love you far too well to drag you down into the dust, to seek your dishonor. I want you, oh God, I want you above everything else; but I mean to win you fairly."

Alice's laugh had an unpleasant ring in it.

"You are only a foolish boy after all," she parried. "To be perfectly frank with you, a marriage between us is utterly out of the question, unless you would be content to wait several years.

"I offer you my love, but you seem unwilling to accept it. Your foolish scruples have blinded you to a golden opportunity."

While she spoke one of her arms had stolen around his neck and she drew his face down to hers, while her hot lips were smothering it with kisses.

"Come, Russel," she panted, "can't you see how desperately I love you?"

For a moment it seemed that he was about to succumb to her charms; but with a mighty effort he closed his ears to the voice of the temptress, and disengaging himself from her embrace, he rose quickly to his feet.

"No—no, Alice!" he pleaded, with his heart beating frantically. "This must not be. I have set you upon a pedestal, if you fall, it will never be by my hand.

"You are still the wife of another man, and I am

bound to respect you as such."

A few minutes of awkward silence ensued.

Alice suddenly started to her feet with a half smothered cry.

"What was that noise?" she gasped.

Russel Sherwood shook his head.

"I failed to hear anything," he assured her.

"I am sure I heard someone move about outside," she said with her face strangely white.

For some time both stood there, waiting breathlessly for a repetition of the sound. But evidently Alice had been mistaken.

Absolute quietness prevailed, and there was nothing to warrant their suspicion that another human being was lurking about the little summer house.

She had come close to him, and her hand slowly stole into his. Alice saw that he was fighting desperately to retain the mastery over himself. His eyes were on the floor, because they could not bear the steady and compelling gaze of her own.

Alice was beginning to fear that she was playing a losing game, but she determined to make one more effort to break though his armor of pride and foolish scruples.

"Russel," she breathed softly, "you cannot love me very much. You are indifferent to my kisses, your heart cannot respond to the passionate pleading of mine.

"Tomorrow my husband will return, and I may not be abe to see you again. Come, love me while you may," she continued, throwing herself upon his bosom. "The opportunity is yours. Come——"

The young man put her from him with a gentle but firm motion.

"No — no, Alice," he cried, trembling in every

limb. "If I were to listen to you this moment, I should learn to despise myself. The taunting voice of a guilty conscience would follow me to the end of the earth.

"It would be a low contemptible thing to do. I esteem your husband far too much to invade his home like a thief in the night and steal even the woman I love more than my own life. And you would sacrifice your self-respect to gratify——"

Russel Sherwood came to a sudden stop.

The sound of hurried footsteps fell upon his ears, and his eyes as well as those of Alice were staring wildly at the door.

An instant later it was burst open, and there, before them, raised to his full height, stood Robert Ames.

Chapter 297

HIS FATHER'S LETTER

LICE tried to smile, a horrified smile, as if to welcome her husband, and Russel Sherwood stood close to her, gritting his teeth in suppressed fury. He, too, attempted to laugh, and came forward holding out his hand.

There was that in Robert Ames' eyes which caused the guilty woman to fling herself before him.

"I am innocent, Robert," she cried, "before God, I am innocent!"

Her twitching fingers clutched at the hem of his coat, but he flung her off as if she had been a poisonous serpent.

She then turned to Russel Sherwood in her frenzied fear.

"You tell him that I am innocent, Russel," she cried in desperation.

The young man stepped forward manfully.

"There is no real reason for your anger, Mr. Ames," he said in a slightly trembling voice. "Do not harm her, for it is I who is to blame for all this. Do with me as you see fit."

Robert Ames raised his hand while a bitter smile crossed his terribly white face.

"I wish no quarrel with you, Russel," he replied hoarsely. "Fortunately I overheard the conversation between you two. I ought to shake your hand for having proven yourself the master of the situation, for having fought off the temptation which this woman, who bears my name, flung into your face."

Russel Sherwood was about to make another plea in her behalf, but Robert shot him a warning look as he said:

"I must ask you to go, and go quickly before I forget everything—and kill you!"

Without again looking at Alice, the young man slunk from the room.

The door had scarcely closed behind Russel Sherwood, when Robert Ames turned to his wife with a half smothered cry of rage.

"What have you to say for yourself, you shameless creature?" he hissed, as he advanced and seized her by the wrist.

Alice had recovered from the feeling of sickening fear. Slowly she raised her eyes to those of her husband.

"I have nothing to say—here," she answered in a scarcely audible voice. "Please come with me to my boudoir. It will be a more fitting place to finish what you have begun."

Her calmness and apparent indifference goaded him to a point of madness.

His frightful anger threatened to get beyond his control, but with an almost superhuman effort he mastered his overpowering emotion.

He opened the door slowly and passed out into the night. Alice followed him with a peculiar light in her eyes. When they reached the villa Robert turned toward the library.

"I want you to come with me to my room," she said again.

He offered no objection to this. It made little difference to him. What he had to say to her could be said there.

His mind was made up to one thing — this was to

be the end of their relations. He would not tolerate her in his presence any longer.

At last they stood face to face in her boudoir. The look on Alice's face was not good to see, while that of her husband expressed a nameless loathing for the woman who had so basely deceived him.

"Now will you kindly offer some explanation for your shameless conduct?" he began. "I would not have believed you capable of drawing young Sherwood into a vile intrigue.

"Yet I might have expected almost anything since you became a partner in crime with Arthur Vernon.

"Together you two succeeded in separating me from a good and pure woman. I will not speak her name, because yours is not fit to be mentioned in the same breath with hers.

"I shall expect you to leave my house to-morrow. I shall immediately institute divorce proceedings."

An expression of defiance swept across her face, while a mocking smile lurked around the corners of her mouth.

She glided over to her desk and after a moment's hasty search, came forward with a letter in her hand.

"I want you to read this letter," she said in a low, menacing tone, "and then we will see if you still dare to show me the door."

Robert Ames took the letter. His eyes seemed ready to bulge from their sockets as he read the words written on the large envelope.

Instantly he recognized it to be the mysterious letter which his father had written.

The words, "To be opened and read by my son Robert one year after his marriage to Alice Procter," stared him in the face.

How had this letter come into Alice's possession?

Without a word he took a seat and began to read. The contents of the letter were as follows:

My Dear Son:

I hope that you will not judge me too harshly after having read the shameful confession I must make to you before I pass out of this world. And I will make it as brief as possible. I must go back to that beautiful Italian city of Venice.

It was there where I met the woman who tempted me as no other woman ever tempted before. I am speaking of Alice Procter.

That I fell desperately in love with her was perhaps no fault of hers, for I must admit that I made the first advances. I became a slave to her irresistible charm and completely lost my head.

Then you arrived in Venice. I saw at once that Alice had fallen in love with you at first sight. Fierce jealousy awoke in me. I was ready to commit almost any crime to make her respond to the passion she aroused in me. I made all sorts of extravagant promises.

The only one which seemed to impress her was my shameful proposition that she shouldl become your wife at my death. But this did not seem to satisfy her. She demanded some binding evidence in writing.

Had I been normal mentally, I would never have done what I did. I changed my will, leaving all of my property to Alice. Immediately afterward I took ill.

My condition grew worse rapidly, and when

I demanded the truth from Dr. Fielding, he told me that I had only a few more hours to live.

The mental torture I suffered during those hours could not be described. It was too late to change that will in your favor without creating a sensation.

They only way I could save you from becoming a pauper, was to insist that you marry Alice.

But that was not the only reason why I was set upon that marriage. I wanted you, in some measure, to atone for the wrong I done her. I am not cowardly enough to lay all the blame on Alice.

She is really a splendid woman, and I know that you two will be happy together. I can die easier knowing that my estate will be shared between you. Although it was willed to her, she will gladly return every dollar of it to you.

Be happy then, both of you, and my last breath will be a plea for forgiveness, Robert. Don't refuse me, my boy. Remember that "to err is human, to forgive, divine."

Your loving father,

Charles Ames.

A low exclamation burst from Robert Ames' lips as he finished reading the letter.

For some moments he stared at the floor with unseeing eyes. He imagined he could Alice's triumphant laugh, and he straightened up with a jerk.

The sheet of paper had dropped from his nerveless

hand. He stooped to pick it up. His face was ashen as he again stared at the floor.

At last he understood why his father had insisted upon this miserable union between him and Alice. The only feeling he was conscious of was that of fierce bitterness.

"God!" he gasped. "How could such a thing happen?"

And he thought of a certain passage in scripture which says: "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the next generation."

"It is not fair!" his rebellious soul cried out. "My own father has wantonlly cheated me out of my birthright. May God be merciful to him. I wish I could forgive him freely, but I can't."

The next thought which entered his madly churning brain was the horrible realization that the will made his wife the mistress of the situation.

All the Ames estate would go to her. And rather than take one single dollar from her filthy hands, he would die of starvation.

Finally his wandering eyes strayed upward and became fixed upon Alice's face. The mocking smile of triumph sent the hot blood surging into his pounding temples.

"You are right," he said with an effort, and folding the letter, he handed it back to his wife. "I have no longer the right to show you the door. It is I who must leave this house. I shall do so without delay."

He stalked past her out of the room. The door had hardly closed behind him when Alice uttered a harsh laugh.

At last she had the acknowledged the power to dictate in matters which involved the Ames millions. Since she and Robert could not agree in love, their re-

lations had become a cold business transaction.

She was not the kind of a woman to feel regret because of a man's love.

And although there had been a time when she firmly believed that she could not live without Robert Ames, she took the sudden change lightly. It was characteristic of her.

But that night as she retired, she did a lot of thinking. There were still a few things she was anxious to discuss with Robert Ames. The understanding between them must be clear and thorough.

When sleep finally came, no unpleasant dreams came to mar it. She did not awaken until her maid came in to raise the window curtains.

"Oh, what time is it, Jane?" she asked with a yawn.

"Just fifteen minutes past nine," the maid answered. "You scolded me once for allowing you to sleep until nine o'clock. That is the reason why I——"

"That's alright," Alice interrupted as she sat up quickly. "I want you to help me dress. I must see my husband before he leaves."

"Mr. Ames has already left," said the girl. "And," she added with an air of importance, "he had all his things packed. Jackson told me his master is not coming back."

Alice looked her surprise.

"Not coming back?" she cried, incredulous.

Jane nodded.

With unusual haste Alice dressed with the help of the maid, then hurried downstairs to verify the information already received. It proved to be true.

Robert Ames had given orders that all his personal belongings be packed, and he had left the house shortly after eight o'clock.

A number of trunks had been called for by a heavy express truck and he had left in a taxi.

And going in a taxi seemed to indicate that he would not use one of the private cars bought with the Ames' money. It had been his way of showing contempt.

Chapter 298

DIVIDED PATHS

THE SUDDEN and unexpected departure of her husband fell like a heavy blow upon Alice. She had not dreamed that he would relinquish his entire fortune to her without even a word of complaint.

When she arrived in the spacious-looking dining salon the following morning, she was met by Jackson. The old faithful servant was in tears.

Her questions brought out the fact that her husband had said farewell to him and all the other servants, after paying them their salaries.

"Did he leave any word for me?" she faltered with trembling lips, not knowing what else to say.

"He left a letter for you, Mrs. Ames," Jackson replied, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Here it is."

Alice took the letter and hurried into the library. She wanted to be alone when she read his last message to her. She tore the envelope hastily and began to read:

Alice:

I am leaving Philadelphia to-day forever. Before I go I shall make all necessary arrangements with my lawyers to have the estate and every penny of the money belonging to the Ames fortune, put in your possession.

My only regret is that you did not allow me to read that letter immediately after my father's death. Matters might have been adjusted at once and much unpleasantness might have been averted.

Thank God, I am young and strong, and the loss of the Ames millions will not crush my ambition. I know that I shall recover from that blow, and for that reason I bear you no ill will.

But the harm you have done me, when you conspired with Arthur Vernon to separate me from the only woman I loved, is irreparable.

You wantonly inflicted a wound in my heart that not even time can heal. Perhaps you will smile with satisfaction when I tell you that Hazel is to become the wife of another man. I have lost her forever.

My heart is filled with bitterness and despair. It is not thirsting for revenge. Retribution will come to you swiftly enough.

The voice of an awakening conscience is perhaps this very moment commanding you to right the terrible wrong you have done me.

But it is too late!

The knowledge of your guilt, and the consciousness that you have ruined two human lives, will be your curse. You may escape man-made laws, but the voice of your conscience will haunt you to your grave.

May God forgive you, for I cannot.

Robert Ames.

The letter fell from Alice's hand. For several

minutes she sat there motionless and stared into space.

With her hands pressed against her violently, throbbing bosom, she rose from her seat and walked to the window.

There was no comfort for her in the happy singing of the birds, nor in the delicate fragrance of the many colored flowers.

For almost an hour she paced the floor of her room with her fingers interlaced behind her back.

It seemed that she was fighting desperately to gain the mastery over herself and keep down the tears that were determined to overwhelm her.

Once or twice a smile shot across her face, but it was a smile not good to see. It was born of an evil spirit.

At last she tossed her head defiantly, she had apparently arrived at some definite conclusion as to her future course.

The thought that she was free to do as she chose filled her with a strange elation.

But an hour since her heart was torn with conflicting emotions.

For a brief space of time she bewailed the sudden departure of her husband; but it seemed that the more she thought about it the less it pained her.

It was true she had loved Robert Ames to some degree. Yes, there had been moments when his love was the only thing which made her life worth living.

But it was a peculiar fact that she no longer appreciated it after it came into her possession.

"Oh, well," she sighed with a certain degree of indifference, "what is the use of crying over spilled milk. One word or an encouraging smile will bring a dozen lovers to my feet."

Robert's letter had depressed her spirits at first.

His words had made a deep impression upon her, but gradually she became her old self.

Again the desire to enjoy her young life was uppermost in her mind.

Her thoughts were of Russel Sherwood, the unwilling lover.

Alice knew that he was still in the city, and she felt confident that a few words would bring him back to her. The fact that her husband had left her, would serve to remove his scruples.

She crossed the room swiftly and took a seat at her desk. With pen in hand, she sat for a few minutes in deep thought. A sudden knock at the door awoke her with a start.

It was Jackson who came to deliver a letter.

A triumphant smile played about her lips as she broke the seal.

She recognized the handwriting. It was Russel Sherwood's. As she read the first few lines, her face paled. Trembling from head to foot, she sank into a chair and read on.

The letter was as follows:

My Dear Mrs. Ames:

When this letter reaches you I shall be on my way to New York. From there I intend to sail at once for Naples, Italy. It would be utterly impossible for me to describe my mental attitude at this moment.

I feel like a common thief who was caught red-handed in the act. I would gladly give ten years of my life to be able to recall the words that

were said last night.

Today I loathe and despise myself as a weakling who listened to the voice of a beautiful temptress.

Had your husband killed me on the spot the punishment would have been far more bearable than the mental torture I must endure henceforth.

I do not blame you, Alice. I fell a willing victim to your smiles and charms, because I had not the manhood and courage to distinguish right from wrong.

I have written a letter to your husband, absolving you from all blame. I told him that I alone was responsible for what occurred, and also that I am leaving this country to-day, perhaps never to return.

I shall try to find solace in forgetfulness, if that be possible. To do this, however, I must tear the image of your face from my heart.

I am afraid I will not be equal to the task. In spite of all that has happened, Alice, I love you.

But cruel fate has decreed that henceforth our paths must lie apart, and I hope that you will find true happiness at the side of the man who is worthy of any good woman's love.

Goodby forever.

Russel.

Alice's eyes were filled with tears as she finished reading the letter. They were tears of rage and bitter

disappointment.

Russel Sherwood had suddenly fallen low in her estimation. He was not a man, he was a weakling and a coward who lacked the courage to fight for the woman he professed to love.

She wept the copious tears of a child who has been deprived of her toy. With an angry flash in her black eyes she walked rapidly up and down the room, tearing Russel Sherwood's letter into shreds.

Chapter 298

A CRY FOR HELP

THE HOT afternoon sun was beating mercilessly upon the peaked roofs of Naples. The many tourists who infested this beautiful Italian city, sought relief from the intense heat by taking trips up the near-by mountains.

Here they encountered the cool breezes from the sea, and also enjoyed a wonderful panoramic view of the city of Naples as well as the bay.

Most of the travelers at this season were Englishmen, Germans and a few Americans.

Seated upon a huge rock was an extremely handsome young man of about twenty-three. His splendid figure and frank, open countenance, stamped him as an American.

There was something in the serious expression of the young man which suggested deep thought and study.

Though full of intelligence, the expression was shadowed by a look of sadness approaching to melancholy.

His intense gaze penetrated you with a sense of suffering, which had been overcome, but left its traces. His mouth was compressed firmly, thus confirming the story of his eyes.

His movements, as he rose to address a few words to a passing tourist, were deliberate, his voice as he spoke was low and gentle.

There was no sign of feebleness or indecision in his slow movements.

On the contrary, every step he takes is significant of strength.

As he stood there, leaning slightly forward and looking upon the wonderful scenery before him, a wistful look came into his eyes.

Half unconsciously he whispered the word — "Alice."

The reader will instantly recognize in him Alice Ames' unwilling lover—Russel Sherwood.

The unhappy young man had been hit hard by his unfortunate love affair, and he was seeking forgetfulness in a constant change of scenery.

He had visited a number of European capitals and finally landed in Naples. Russel had no definite plans for the future. He drifted about, guided solely by his impulses and fancies.

It was toward evening when he began to descend and make his way slowly to his hotel. As he passed one of the many inns along the shore of the picturesque bay, he was rather surprised to hear two feminine voices conversing excitedly in English.

On the verana of this inn stood two ladies, evidently trying to gain some information from an ignorant porter who could not understand their language.

Russel smileld as he saw the man go through a number of comic gestures in his eagerness to give the ladies the desired information.

He advanced quickly with his hat in his hand.

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" he asked in a well modulated voice.

The elder of the two ladies turned her stern forbidding countenance to him, and with a withering look, she said curtly:

"No, sir. Thank you very much."

Not abased in the least by the brusque manner

nor the icy stare of the elderly lady, he allowed his eyes to rest for a moment upon the face of her companion, who was a young girl of perhaps eighteen.

To say that she was very pretty would not be doing her justice.

A mass of golden curls straggled in rebellious fashion about her delicate white brow, and a pair of beautiful blue eyes looked pleadingly from a perfectly modeled face

Her figure was slight and girlish.

It seemed that words of the elder lady had jarred unpleasantly upon her sensibilities.

"You spoke rather uncivil to that gentleman, mother," she said with a frown, after Russel Sherwood had gone. "You might at least have thanked him in a pleasant tone of voice."

"It is not becoming to you to critize either my action or speech," the eldler lady replied severly. "One must be extremely cautious while traveling abroad, and I do not propose to encourage every young man who has the temerity to stop and ask questions."

The young girl did not answer her mother. She followed her silently while an audible sigh escaped her cherry lips.

Russel Sherwood had reached the city by this time, and he sauntered leisurely through the streets of Naples.

Finally he entered one of the restaurants. He experienced little difficulty in reading the menu card which was printed in Italian.

It seemed that his unhappy love affair had not impaired his appetite, for he devoured a large quantity of viands with the manners of a hungry pirate.

When he emerged from the restaurant he was in much better spirits. He was still thinking of the lovely

young girl he had met a few hours ago

The hot sun had disappeared behind the mountains. The atmosphere grew more bearable when a cool breeze began to blow from the ocean. It was a most beautiful evening.

Russel Sherwood, disinclined to return to his hotel, hailed a taxi and ordere the chauffeur to drive him slowly through the suburbs of the city.

He leaned back in the seat puffing complacently at a cigar, while his thoughts wandered at random. His eyes swept the purple horizon, then gazed rapturously upon the wonderful scene before him.

The silent waters of the bay mirrored the purple sky, while hundreds of white sailed fishing smack dotted its surface.

Suddenly he was rudely awakened from his reverie by a piercing shriek which came from somewhere in the distance.

He leaned forward eagerly and listened.

There—it was again. It came evidently from a woman who was in sore distress.

The driver stepped on the gas, and the car rapidly neared an old tavern which stood close to the bay. Russel started up when he saw a young girl emerge, crying loudly for help.

She was followed by three rough-looking men who were evidently bent on doing her bodily harm. With a bound Russel sprang from the car.

There was an ominous flash in his eyes as he came pon the assailants.

"Save me, for God's sake, save me!" the girl cried wildly, as she threw herself at his feet.

The men seemed ill disposed to relinguish their prey, and they advanced threateningly. Sherwood stood on the defensive. One of the men rushed forward with

an open knife in his hand.

His arm was raised to strike, but the knife never reached its mark. Sherwood's fists shot out swiftly, and the next instant the scoundrel rolled in the dust.

The next assailant was disposed of with the same swiftness, while the third turned suddenly and ran back into the tavern, evidently to fetch reenforcements.

Russell Sherwood staggered back for a few paces when he recognized in the disheveled young woman, the beautiful girl whom he had accosted on his way to Naples some hours ago.

She had risen to her feet. Her eyes were filled with an expression of horror when she saw one of the brutes rush upon her rescuer with an open knife.

A fervent "Thank God" escaped her lips when he fell a moment later insensibly to the ground.

Her heart swelled in admiration for the brave and handsome young man who had come so gallantly to her defense.

It seemed that her terror had bereft her of her power of speech. When the third assailant turned and fled, she took Russel Sherwood by the arm and pulled him toward the tavern.

"My mother — she is in there," she managed to gasp at last.

"Where?" Russel asked eagerly.

"There, in the tavern. She is at the mercy of those brutes."

Without waiting to hear another word, he dashed into the tavern. He found the elderly woman who had snubbed him so contemptibly, in a sorry plight.

She was in the middle of three ruffians who made strenuous attempts to separate her from her purse.

Like a flash Russel Sherwood was among them. His fist shot out with lightning rapidity, and before any

of the man had recovered from the effects of his blows and their surprise, he took the still struggling woman and carried her bodily from the room.

It was the work of a few seconds to life her into the automobile. The young girl followed quickly. With a sharp command to the driver Sherwood jumped in and together they were whirled away.

They made their escape not a moment too soon. The men had marshalled their forces and came from the tavern with a rush, uttering fierce curses and imprecations.

Chapter 299

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN

RALPH STEWART was a greatly surprised, and also a very much pleased man when he received an unexpected visit from Hazel Wynne. He saw at the first glance as soon as they were seated, that something troubled her. There were dark rings of worry under her lovely eyes, and she seemed to have grown thinner since he saw her last.

For about a minute they sat opposite each other, neither anxious to begin the conversation.

"Where have you been keeping yourself?" Stewart inquired presently.

Hazel did not answer this question, but countered with:

"I am in an awful predicament, Mr. Stewart. You were always so kind to me. That is why I came to you for advice."

He looked at the obviously unhappy young woman with pity.

"I'll give you more than mere advice, Hazel," he declared. "You know that I'd do anything for you. I told you once that this house might be your home for life if you cared to accept it."

She blushed vividly and shook her head.

"No honorable man would care to make me his wife, knowing what I am," she murmured.

"I consider myself an honorable man, and I——" Stewart began, but she stopped him with an expressive gesture of her hand.

"Please do not make me more miserable than I

am, dear Mr. Stewart. I am about to make a confession to you." She lowered her head until the chin almost touched her breast. "I—I am to become a mother.

"Oh, God!" she burst out, burying her face in her sleeve. "You—you don't know what that means to me. I am not a wife, and the man who——"

"The man who tricked you must pay," Stewart broke in vehemently. "He will pay. Go to him at once and state your condition. A most pleasant surprise awaits you."

She looked at the speaker long and earnestly. What did he mean by saying that? She was nothing to Robert Ames.

He had a wife and was apparently happy with her. To call upon the man who had so basely deceived her, was utterly out of the question.

While Hazel indulged in these kind of thoughts, Ralph Stewart's mind was busy with a problem of his own. Robert Ames had called on him. That last interview he recalled. He remembered everything that had been said.

Robert had departed in haste, and with the avowed determination to punish those who had come between him and Hazel.

He had vowed to find her and make amends for the cruel wrong done her. Stewart did not want to discuss the details and the result of this meeting with the girl.

So far as he knew now, Robert Ames had not found Hazel. He could not think of a better way to force the issue, than to send her to his home. And before he considered the wisdom of this, he spoke.

"I don't know how you feel toward Mr. Ames," he said. "It really does not matter much. The paramount issue is your own interest. Robert Ames is the father of

your unborn child. He must provide for it. Yes, he must do more than that. It is his duty to remove the stain which rests on your name."

Hazel's lips began to quiver. There was unmistakable pride in her bearing and voice as she replied:

"You are mistaken when you think that I would accept even a penny of Mr. Ames' money. Although the marriage between us was a fraud, a piece of despicable trickery, I want to take the necessary steps to have it annulled. I want to be absolutely free. Thank God, I am young and strong enough to take care of myself and my baby."

"There, there, now," he soothed when she began to sob, "don't take it too much to heart. Whatever you'd rather do, meets with my approval. But I suggest that you call at the Ames mansion. Perhaps it is not yet too late to straighten this thing out."

She wiped the moisture from her eyes hastily and rose.

"I will go," she declared with new determination. "I will meet him face to face and demand my absolute freedom."

"That's the thing to do," agreed Ralph Stewart, although he knew that Robert Ames would take her into his arms the instant he saw her. "Go, and my best wishes are with you."

And so Hazel started on her trip to the Ames villa on the picturesque Schuylkill River.

She took the car to the outskirts of the city and then walked leisurely along the Schuylkill river drive toward the Ames villa.

She was still debating with herself whether or not her unexpected visit to his house was the proper thing. Sometimes she wished that she had written Robert a letter, appraising him of her intentions.

Her heart beat frantically when at last she saw the pretty Ames villa looming up in the distance.

With her memory crowded with the thoughts of a happy past, she wended her way slowly forward. She saw him again as he had appeared after her mother was taken away from her by the relentless hand of death.

The image of his handsome face had never been erased from her heart.

In spite of all that had occurred between them, she loved him still. The thought of him loving this other woman was becoming unbearable.

And this was the man she was going to ask to release her—to give her back the freedom he had taken away from her.

When she at last stood at the door of the Ames villa the cold perspiration stood on her forehead.

Her hand trembled violently as she touched the bell.

An instant later the door was opened by a gray-haired servant, whom she recognized as Jackson. He was the man who had recognized her during the week she spent at the Ames villa as a nurse.

Hazel saw the expression of surprise on his face as he stepped aside respectfully to allow her to enter the door.

"How are you, Jackson," she said, with a voice that was unlike her own. "Will you kindly announce me?"

Jackson bowed low while murmuring a few incoherent words, then disappeared.

Alice was in her boudoir when she was apprised of the news that her former nurse, Miss Wynne, was waiting in the reception room to see her.

Alice looked her surprise at the announcement.

Continued in next number

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